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AUTHOR Grove, Cornelius Lee
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ABSTRACT

This is an imaginary first-person account of a 15-year-old Portuguese student who has spent a year and a half in an American high school. While conceding that the language barrier did prove difficult for him at first, the student says that language was not the overwhelming problem he expected it to be. He proceeds to explain six features of life and work in American schools that he has never understood. First, he finds it difficult to accept that he must attend school until he is 16 years old; in Portugal, six years of formal schooling was considered sufficient. Second, he feels strongly that he is treated as a child in American schools; in Portugal he was considered mature and responsible. Third, he is uncomfortable with the relative informality of American classroom procedure. Fourth, he finds examinations in America to be very different from what he encountered in Portugal. Fifth, he finds it difficult to deal with American teachers who want to be his friend instead of remaining aloof. Sixth, he discusses an apparent difference in the role and purpose of schooling in the two nations. In sum, he decides that American schools are easy and demeaning. (Author/GC)

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Six Non-Language-Related Problems Facing Older Immigrant Portuguese Students

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My name is João Simão. I've lived in the United States now for about a year and a half. I'm from Faial, one of the islands of the Azores in the North Atlantic. It's very close to Pico, the one with the great tall volcano on it. I grew up in a little town named Castelo Branco. I guess no one ever thought much about Castelo Branco until they built the new airport there several years ago. It's not a big airport; you can only fly to some of the other islands from it on SATA, the airline of the Azores. But over the years since that airport was built I saw family after family from our island and from Pico take the one way trip on SATA. They were on their way to America. And, almost like clockwork, they'd be back three or four years later to give all their old neighbors a huge Festa do Espírito Santo. Giving this big feast was supposedly the way they thanked the Holy Spirit for their success in America. I say "supposedly" because sometimes it seemed that they were mainly coming back to show off their riches. Maybe it was a little bit of both. Anyhow, you couldn't help but be affected by it. I guess it

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finally got to my father. A few days after some neighbors of ours left for America, he said to my mother, "Caramba, Maria, somos malucos. Vamos. Vamos para América!" So they borrowed a great amount of money and...well, here I am. America hasn't turned out to be like everyone told us. We haven't gotten rich overnight. But we haven't starved, either. And now we're actually managing to save some money each month. We're all working together, the whole family. And in another two years or so it'll be our turn to throw a Festa do Espírito Santo in Castelo Branco.

I'll be sixteen years old next month...finally! Why did I say "finally"? Well, because when I'm sixteen I can quit going to school. Son-of-a-gun, just one month to go! I thought I'd never make it. What? Too bad I wasn't in a bilingual program? But I was in a bilingual program. Sure. Well, no, I don't know whether it was a good one or not. But I liked my teachers pretty much. Most of them were second or third generation Portuguese, and they spoke Portuguese well enough. A couple of them had even visited the Azores, and sometimes we'd talk about the islands in class. We used to talk about whaling expeditions and stuff like that. I liked that. But mostly, I didn't like going to school here in America. I don't know...it's hard to put my finger on it, really. But I haven't liked it, and that's why I'm so happy to be turning sixteen. There were just some things about school in America that I didn't like, didn't understand. Was it the language? Well, of course, it was a

problem coming to the States when the only language I knew was Portuguese. I was very frightened about this in the beginning. But I wasn't in school more than a day or two before I found that almost all of my teachers were very aware of my difficulty and very ready to be helpful. Of course, having the bilingual teachers around was a help, too, no doubt about it. But you just asked me if it's my language problem that's driving me out of school at sixteen. A year ago I might have answered "yes." But now, I'm not so sure. The language problem worked itself out in time; looking back, I'd have to say that it wasn't the overwhelming problem I expected it to be. But there are <u>other</u> things about school in this country that I've just never understood. I got used to English in time, but some of these other things I never quite got used to. And, with these things, the bilingual program has been scarcely any help. I guess that's because the bilingual program is so preoccupied with <u>language</u>.

Let me see if I can explain this to you a little better. I can see that you're feeling perplexed. I'll try to tell you about some of the things about school in America that I still don't really understand.

The first thing I don't understand is why in the world I've got to go to school at all. Yes, I know you Americans think a person's got to go to school for at least twelve years in order to be worth anything, but I just don't see it myself. You see, in Portugal, six years of school was sufficient. In six years

I learned everything I'll ever need to know--how to read and write, basic arithmetic and science, a little history and religion, health and first aid.... Once I'd learned those subjects, it simply wasn't considered necessary for me to go to school any longer, and I was free to go to work. Why, before my family left the Azores, I'd been doing the work of a man for nearly a year. I worked in the fields and on the roads with the other men, and I brought home my pay and gave it to my father for the good of the house. So did my older brothers. We all were working men, proud to be able to contribute directly to the welfare of our household. Sure, it was hard work; sometimes it was backbreaking. But it was good, honest work, and I always felt that there was a certain dignity in doing it. None of us in my family left the Azores because we didn't want to work. No, sir. A life of ease was not what we expected of America. We left the Azores because there we did not get paid much for our work. All that backbreaking work, honorable and dignified though it was, never brought in enough for us to afford a few of life's luxuries or to build up a cash reserve in the bank. We lived a hand-to-mouth existence there; we never had anything to show for our labors. Don't misunderstand me, now. We weren't poor. We weren't living in caves. We weren't starving or naked by any means. But neither could we get ahead. We never could enjoy the feeling of success. And <u>that's</u> why we decided to come to America, don't you see? We came to improve ourselves economically, to have something to

show for our labors. We didn't come to avoid work, but to profit from it! It was a family venture; all of us looked forward to contributing our share. And then, no sooner did we arrive when I found that, just because I was fourteen years old, I wasn't allowed to work. I had to go to school. School! I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. What use could I be to my family sitting around in school? What's that? Don't I want to become a doctor, lawyer, or teacher? Pardon me for smiling, but I've heard that question so many times.... Yet, each time, I've never quite known how to answer it. I feel lots of respect for professional people, of course, but...but I guess I find it hard to see myself doing those kinds of jobs. No one in my family expects me to take that path. In fact, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't like it. Let me put it to you this way. I have a cousin who's twenty-three or twenty-four. He's a teacher. When our families get together, my older brothers kid him about it. They say, "Tu és que estás na América. Tu és que estás na América." That means, literally, "You're the one who's in America." And by that they mean "Ah, you have the life! You have a game of your life. You don't do anything, like the Americans." They have to struggle for a living, see, and they just assume that being a student or a teacher is not a struggle. Teaching to them is a kind of sport, almost. It's a passatempo, a pastime. And when my brothers are really feeling mean, they leave off the kidding and remind my cousin, the teacher, that they are making a lot more money than he is. There's no overtime pay for teachers. They have lots of education and little to show for it.

Well, the law said that I had to go to school, so I went. But I certainly haven't liked the way I've been treated there. It's been really hard to swallow. I mean, the teachers are forever treating us as though we were children. Babies, almost. I just can't get over the way you Americans deal with people of my age. You seem to have to know where we are and what we're doing at every moment. There's no sense of trust. We students aren't allowed to take responsibility for ourselves. Teachers in the hallways. Monitors in the cafeteria. Bathroom passes--why, in my school we have to carry around a huge wooden key whenever we're coming or going to the john. Rules, rules, rules! We can't even go outside onto the campus unless a couple of teachers are out there to keep us under surveillance at all times, and the notion that we might be free to come and go as we please whenever we have no classes scheduled is simply out of the question. What kind of a person do they think I am? I am nearly sixteen years old. It means nothing to my teachers, nothing. I might as well be four or five the way they look after me. What? It's not fair to single out Portuguese students this way? Wait, you don't understand. All the students in my school are treated this way. Oh, yes. Portuguese and American, black and white, younger and older, it makes no difference. Wait, I take that back. They've got a little system called "Senior Privileges" for the oldest and smartest students in the school. Basically, it allows them to escape the constant monitoring of the teachers for short periods each day. Big deal.

Why, I was allowed more responsibility for myself in Portuguese schools when I was seven or eight years old than these poor eighteen-year-olds get with their so-called privileges. What do I mean? Well, we just weren't constantly monitored and restricted all the time. When I was in escola primária, my friends and I would often go down the street for something to eat during the break. No teacher was with us. We didn't sign out or anything like that. We simply went, and we got back in time, and there wasn't any fuss. But in America, it can't happen that way. Young people just aren't considered responsible or mature. It's a feeling, an assumption, that runs through everything that happens at school. Let me give you an example. One of the first differences I noticed about American schools is that when the students come into the classroom, the teacher is always there. It was never like this in Portugal. There, the students came in and got themselves ready for the lesson, and <u>then</u> the teacher came in and began to teach. Also, the teacher was usually the first to leave in Portugal, unlike here in the States. Well, I asked myself why this was, but I couldn't figure it out. Finally, I got up the courage to ask a teacher who had been especially friendly to me. He just shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, it just isn't right for students to be anywhere without adult supervision. My goodness, João, if we let kids run loose this place would be in shambles in no time." See what I mean? It's automatically assumed in America that teenagers are troublemakers. But for me and the other Portuguese students, this attitude is demeaning. It robs us of our maturity.

Let's see, now.... Another thing that's bothered me is the different way in which American teachers run their classes. Perhaps the difference is more in what they expect us students to do in class. I suppose it's both. Do you know how classes are run in Portuguese schools? Well, I would say that, in comparison to American classes, they are very..., well, businesslike. Or maybe "formal" or "serious" would be a better word. I'm not sure. But one thing is clear: In Portugal, the teacher is the teacher, and the students are the students, and the great gap between them is almost never closed. What kind of gap am I talking about? Well, it's a social gap and it's an academic gap. In Portuguese classrooms, the teacher is king. Yes, that's a good way of putting it, I think--rei e escravos, king and slaves. The teacher is presumed to know all and to be capable of explaining all clearly to the students. And the students are expected to sit at the feet of the master, so to speak, and to copy down the golden drops of knowledge as they fall from the teacher's lips. Oh dear, I'm sorry. I'm being too sarcastic, perhaps. It's only since I've been in America that I've come to fully understand how tough and formal Portuguese schools were. Why, some of our teachers there didn't even permit us to ask questions, and very rarely were we given an opportunity to express our opinions about anything. Of course, there were differences among teachers in Portugal, just as there are here; some were more formal than others. But, in general, my last two or three years in Portuguese schools went something like this:

The teacher entered the classroom, delivered his lecture, and left. For variety, there were recitations. The teacher would call on individual students by number, and ask them a couple of questions about the material; if the student couldn't recite an acceptable answer without delay, a zero went down by his name in the teacher's book. These oral exams counted as much as the written exams, and you never got a second chance. As for the lecture itself, it just wasn't heard of for a student to raise his hand and ask the teacher to repeat something or to explain something a little better. If there was something you didn't understand, you had to figure it out by reading the textbook or through conversations with your classmates. Discipline was very strict; we were always fearful of causing a disturbance during the lecture because that was grounds for being thrown out of class, and three of these disciplinary actions during a year could result in failure of the course. Why, I've seen Portuguese students thrown out of class for doing things that an American teacher would scarcely notice. Which brings me to the way American teachers run their classes. It's really quite different. Sure, some American teachers lecture, but they have so many other ways of trying to get the material across that lectures are rather rare. And even then, it's more like they're talking things over with us. More importantly, in American classrooms we students can ask questions. I mean...it's not that we <u>can</u>, it's that we're <u>expected</u> to. And when we ask questions, we get answers! This is one feature of American schools that I liked from the

start. On the other hand, I've never really gotten used to being asked for my opinion or about my personal preferences or experiences by the teacher during the lesson. There's so much discussion in American classes; it was never like this in Portugal, believe me. Just the other day in my social studies class, Mr. Medeiros started asking each of us which country we thought was responsible for the start of World War One, and why. It wasn't an oral test, or what we would have called a recitation in Portugal. No. He just wanted our opinions. Well, I thought to myself, as I have many times before, "Hey, Mr. Medeiros, you're supposed to be telling us the answers and the reasons why, not asking us. What do you care what we think?" But, I don't know.... It's happened so many times since I've been here that I must be wrong; maybe American teachers do care what their students think. Or maybe they think it's a good way to teach to ask for the students' ideas and opinions.

Now that reminds me of another problem I've found as a student in America. Examinations. Come to think of it, it's not altogether a problem--in many ways it's a relief. The first thing that struck me about written examinations in America is that there are so many of them. If you have any idea of how frightening written exams are in Portugal, you'll understand how badly I reacted to this at first. I had a major crisis at least once a month. But, after several months I began to understand that these exams are not really that critical in determining our final grades. And by that time I had also become aware that

exams in this country are laughably simple, at least in relation to what I'd become used to in Portugal. Why, I used to memorize by heart page after page of material when I was in school there, and on the exams I had to be careful not only to feed it back correctly but also to spell every word correctly. It was very rigorous. One had to study a minimum of two or three hours every night in order to do well. But here, exams are easy. You don't have to memorize anything at all. Most of the tests are multiple choice or fill-in-the-blanks or true/false, and just about anyone can make a good mark on that kind of test without studying two or three hours a night. However, there is one type of examination that has caused me great difficulty. I was reminded of it a few minutes ago when I was talking about how American teachers like to ask students for their ideas and opinions. It's harmless enough for teachers to do this informally during class, but it's quite another matter when we get that type of question on an examination. Then there's a grade involved. You want an example? O.K. A month or so ago we had an essay test in social studies; one of the questions went something like this: "Taking into account the political campaign styles of Theodore Roosevelt and William McKinley, who do you think would have won if they had run against each other in 1976, and why?" And there was another one something like this: "Do you think Warren G. Harding would have been impeached if he had not died in office? Why or why not?" Now how in the world am I supposed to prepare myself for that kind of test? There's no correct answer! In Portugal, questions like that were totally unheard of. In Portugal, stu-

dents got facts from their teachers and textbooks, they learned those facts (often by heart), and then on exams they were asked to prove that they'd learned them by giving them back. Here, learning facts doesn't seem to be sufficient. It seems to me that American teachers are sometimes more interested in seeing whether I've got a fertile imagination than in how much and how well I can learn.

You say you'd like to know more about the differences between Portuguese and American teachers? Sure. There are lots of differences. Of course, both in Portugal and in the States I've had many different kinds of teachers. But in spite of those differences, I can also talk about what is typical of teachers here and there. I can make many...how do you say it? Generalizations. A little while ago I talked about the Portuguese classroom in terms of "rei e escravos," or king and slaves. That's strong language, I know, but there's truth in it. In Portugal, teachers have a great deal of status in their communities; in fact, in most places, the only person who is more respected is the priest. And this high status of teachers is clearly reflected in the way both students and parents deal with them, and vice versa. The relation of the parent to the teacher is one of subordinate to superior. You must remember that in Portugal there is nothing at all to compare to the American system of local control of education. Portuguese education is controlled from Lisboa. Education is the concern of the trained professional, the teacher. So parents don't go around meddling

in school affairs, and they would never think of telling a teacher how to do his job. The only exception might be when a teacher beats a child too severely--but even then, there are plenty of parents who wouldn't dare to question the teacher's judgment and methods. Well, this same attitude, that of putting the teacher on a pedestal, is shared by the students...only more so. Students show great respect for the teacher both inside and outside of the classroom. They keep their distance. And the teachers, for their part, remain aloof from the students. There are exceptions, yes, but they are few and far between. On the whole, teachers in Portugal are formal, cool, and demanding in their relations with students. They tend to have little interest in giving students individual help or attention. Now, I would have to say that this is less true in the lower grades, and more and more true as you advance up toward the secondary level. I myself never attended a liceu, but I know people who have; from what I hear, liceu teachers just can't be bothered to look after the individual needs of their students. They expect to come into the classroom, deliver their lecture, and leave. Their attitude toward the students is "sink or swim." O.K., let's talk about American teachers. Matters here could hardly be more different. It took me a long time to accept the fact that American teachers seemed to want to be my friend. It may seem crazy to say that I couldn't accept an offer of friendship, but you've got to understand that to my way of thinking, this was wrong. I expected

teachers to be authority figures; I had come to accept that as their proper role. Here, no. Of course, as time went on I came to understand that American teachers didn't exactly want to be my friend in the deep and intimate sense that we mean by "amigo" in Portuguese. They didn't want to be my pal, as you'd put it. But there certainly was a huge difference in the way they treated me. There is a sense of convivência, of companionship, between teachers and students in this country that one almost never finds in Portugal. And it comes out most strongly in the way American teachers pay attention to their students as individuals. They want to know our opinions and ideas. They invite us to ask questions and to seek extra help. They come over to our desks and offer to help if they see we are stuck on a difficult part of the assignment. They stay after class to talk about...well, about almost anything with us--sports, politics, our families, the latest gossip.... And if they see us outside of school, they stop and talk, or at least wave or say hello if they're in a hurry. It's really quite extraordinary! Why, I've come to see teachers as human beings. Personally, I like this. How could I help but like it? And yet, I would have to say that I'm not sure it's better than the Portuguese way in all respects. Why? Because when teachers act like this, it's too easy for the students to get away with murder. I have been shocked at the way American students behave. Not all of them, of course. But many American students are what in Portuguese we would call mal educado; that means that they are lacking in courtesy and self-discipline. Compared with Portu-

guese students, American students are poorly behaved and lacking in respect. I've heard American students tell a teacher, publicly, to go to hell. I've seen them ignore direct orders. I've seen them almost running wild in the school building. I've seen them writing filthy remarks on bathroom walls. I've seen them come to school dressed as though they were on their way to the beach. Believe me, these kinds of things are very, very rare in Portuguese schools; here, they are almost daily occurrences. And I can't help but wonder whether there's any relation between the way American students behave and the way American teachers behave. I wonder whether the lenient, easy-going attitude of American teachers may have contributed in some way to the disrespectful attitude shown by so many American students. I don't know.... But this I can say. In my opinion, the best situation of all would be to be in a school where the students were disciplined as they are in Portugal, but where the teachers taught as they do in America. In Portugal, I feared my teachers. In America, I fear my fellow students.

Well, those are the main things that have been difficult for me to get used to here. I can't think of anything else.... But, you know, now that I'm thinking out loud about all this, it all seems to hang together somehow. I mean...all the things I've mentioned seem to be just different parts of the same whole. How can I explain it? Perhaps it's that the basic purpose of education in Portugal and America is different. Yes, there <u>is</u> a basic difference of some kind. But what is it...? Let me tell

you what's coming to my mind right now. In Portuguese schools, children are beaten or otherwise punished, sometimes severely, when they are unwilling or unable to learn the assigned material. It is very rare for a Portuguese student to be punished because he's broken some rule or behaved badly. In America, it's just the opposite. Students here are punished for bad social behavior, but almost never because they can't or won't learn their lessons. Yes, I'm seeing it more clearly now. In Portugal, learning's the thing. Learning facts. Learning theories. Learning them well. I know you're not going to like my saying this, but I can't say that learning seems very important in American schools. Not <u>that</u> kind of learning, at any rate. Why, I have really been astounded by all the things that go on in American schools that have little or no relation to learning. I'm not only talking about all the sports activities, the drama societies, the service clubs and after-school activities, and all that. I'm talking about what goes on in class, too. All this discussion and expressing of opinions, all the use of films and games and other things that are supposed to make learning painless if not fun.... As I said before, American teachers seem more interested in helping their students develop a fertile imagination than in providing them with cold, hard facts to learn. Sure, I'll agree that it's nice to have someone take an interest in my ideas and opinions. But I still can't get used to the fact that it's my <u>teacher</u> who ought to be doing this. Teachers teach, and students learn; isn't <u>that</u> what school should be all about? In Portugal, yes. In America,

it's not so simple as that. Oh, I'm not saying that there is no emphasis on learning in American schools. I am saying that that emphasis seems secondary as often as not. You Americans seem so concerned that your children be happy and creative and imaginative and democratic and expressive and I don't know what all. You don't want life to be too tough on children. You almost become the servants of children. And you don't really want them to grow up and assume responsibility for themselves. What? You say I'm talking nonsense? Well, I'll tell you, if I had only listened to what you Americans <u>say</u> about raising children and about education, I might agree with you now. But I had an unusual advantage when it comes to making a judgment about all this: I couldn't understand what you were saying for a long time because I couldn't speak English. I had to be content with <u>observing</u> what was going on. And, in this case at least, I must agree that actions speak louder than words. In my judgment, Americans are overprotective of their children right up until they are eighteen to twenty-one years old. Nowhere is this attitude demonstrated more clearly than in your schools. For us who come into them from Portuguese schools, they are easy. Easy and insulting. We are treated like little children in your secondary schools both academically and socially. You rob us Portuguese students of our maturity, and I can't see what you give us in return. In my case, at least, except for the learning of the English language I did not meet any serious intellectual challenge whatsoever in the American high school.

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